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QUEEN MAEVE'S TOMB

Rita Feinstein

The bus stops in front of Ercilia's house, pueblo-style and coral-colored like every house in La Dorada. You follow her purple-and-black-checkered backpack down the steps.

Yesterday's snow is still thick on the ground, a rare treat in the desert. You love the crunch beneath your boots, the tread marks you leave behind. You want to mark up the whole world.

Ercilia retrieves the spare key from beneath a terracotta animal of indeterminate species and opens the door. You feel a pulse of jealousy at her independence. Your parents would never leave you home alone.

"Want a snack?" Ercilia asks.

Of course you do. You are bottomlessly hungry.

You make almond butter sandwiches on cheese bread, and you can't decide if it's good or bad. It fills your stomach, but you're hungry for something else. You don't want to be the first to suggest it. You don't want to show Ercilia how desperate you are.

"So...Faerie Quest?" she asks.

You sigh in heavy relief. You imagine a whole bat colony spilling from your mouth.

You take your plates to the den, and Ercilia powers up the desktop computer. She double-clicks the butterfly wing icon. For a moment nothing happens, then the cursor starts spinning, and then the screen plunges into anticipatory darkness.

Your parents don't allow computer games, so this is the only time you can get your fix.

You're worried you might be using Ercilia, but no—your friendship is purebred

enough to earn a blue ribbon at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show.

Ercilia opens your saved game, and you're so excited that you actually drool a little. Last time, you stopped right before the final boss fight. Today, everything comes to an end.

In Faerie Quest, released in 2001 by Mom's Basement Entertainment, you play Hazel, a young earth faerie whose garden is trampled by rhino-like cragghorns. The cragghorns take everything—not just your livelihood, but your family too. On your quest to save them, you learn that Maeve, a dark faerie, has ascended the throne, and is planning on plunging the Faerie Realms into eternal night.

At the last save point, you and Ercilia were right outside Queen Maeve's castle. You've maxed out Hazel's stats and hit points, and you've loaded her inventory with healing potions. The only thing left to do is walk through the doors.

Since your fingers are more dexterous on the keyboard, Ercilia lets you steer. You maneuver Hazel into the palace, use her elemental magic to cut down Maeve's cragghorn guards, and burst into the throne room, and—

Dread and almond butter congeal in your stomach.

Cut-scene: Maeve rises from the throne, chuckling villainously. Her hair is purple and green, like a bowl of mixed grapes, and her dramatic black dress highlights her impossible hip-to-waist ratio. "You don't know what you've done," she hisses, wings unfurling. She extends her hands and acid-green fireballs swell in her palms.

The cut-scene ends. The fight begins.

Ercilia, La Dorada, New Mexico, the world—it all ceases to exist. You are Hazel, and you are going to bring Maeve to her knees. You use all the spells you learned in your quest, all the gifts the elemental fae gave you, but Maeve is a formidable foe. Twice she brings you to the point of death, and only by gulping healing potions do you survive the onslaught. Finally, impossibly, euphorically, you snuff out the last slice of red on her health bar. The purple crystal on her scepter shatters. The usurper has been defeated.

Ercilia screams and hugs you. You return to your body in pins and needles. Your eyes are still glued to the screen.

Something is terribly, terribly wrong.

You're in another cut-scene, but there is no triumphant music in the background. Maeve sprawls on the tiled floor, her expression pained. "You fools," she gasps. "I tried to save you."

You watch in horror as yellow mist eeps from her shattered scepter. Maniacal laughter fills the throne room. The mist takes shape, forming a light faerie with eyes like unsweetened lemonade and a pour of molten gold hair. Iphigenia. The true queen. The victim of Maeve's tyranny. But why is she smiling like that?

"Bra-vo," Iphigenia drawls, slow-clapping. "I'm impressed you made it this far. Thanks for releasing me, by the way. It's no fun being stuck inside a crystal. Now, where were we? Oh yes, I was siphoning souls! That's the secret to eternal youth and beauty, you know."

Ercilia grabs your shoulder, but you're so numb you hardly feel it. "Oh my god," she breathes. "Iphigenia is the bad guy?"

"Your soul looks particularly tasty," Iphigenia says, flapping her butter-yellow wings. "Don't mind if I do."

She extends her pointed fingertips, and Hazel's outline begins to blur. "No!" you scream.

But before she can reduce your hit points to zero, Maeve intervenes. Your fingers go limp on the keyboard as the dark faerie—your sworn enemy—flings herself in front of Iphigenia to save you. "I give you my blessing!" Maeve cries as she bursts into purple dust.

You inhale the dust, all of it, its wrathful darkness inking its way through your veins. You will destroy Iphigenia. You will avenge Maeve.

"Are you okay?" Ercilia asks.

Your cheeks are wet. Your lip is wet. Without meaning to, you've drawn blood.

Maeve was just trying to protect you. Everything you've ever known is wrong.

The rest of the game passes in a blur. You defeat Iphigenia and restore balance to

the faerie realms, and Hazel ascends the throne as the new queen. It's a hollow victory. Nothing can bring Maeve back.

Your parents pick you up an hour later. "Did you have a good time?" they ask.

You don't respond. Like the almond butter sandwich, you're not sure. All you know is that you'll never be the same.

*

"You know what this means," Ercilia says the next day on the bus. "Darkness is good and light is evil. It makes sense. I've kind of always thought that."

"Yes," you say. "Me too."

It feels chillingly correct, deliciously subversive, something that separates you from cucumber-melon girls who get their ears pierced at Claire's and weigh down their backpacks with googly-eyed kitten keychains.

Ercilia's hands wave excitedly as she explains how men are afraid of women because they draw their power from the moon. Through the bus window, the moon is a half-full husk in the blue sky, but you feel it tugging.

Last night, you dreamed about a bonus level where Maeve could be resurrected. When you woke, your stomach became a mineshaft with nothing at the bottom, not even echoes.

Ercilia tells you she's writing a story about girls who wake up in coffins, so hungry they could puke, and only their own blood will satisfy them.

You look at your wrists and imagine tooth marks like rows of stitches.

"I'm writing a story too," you say, "but I don't know what it's about yet."

*

Because you've been such a good girl, your parents give you Faerie Quest for your eleventh birthday. You play through the whole thing in two days, barely pausing to eat or pee. You make different choices, try to stop Iphigenia before she incinerates Maeve, but in the end, the outcome is the same. There's nothing you

can do to save her.

"What's wrong?" your mom asks, because something is obviously wrong.

You look at her, the same mom you've always had—short hair, red lips, vintage dress—and see a stranger. Someone capable of lying, of keeping secrets. She's so much more than the person who purses her lips when you watch anime but still tucks little love notes between your sandwich and juice box. For the first time, you see her as a complete person, and it unscrolls a vast desert between the two of you.

That's what's wrong. Life isn't a series of prewritten quests, combats, and cut-scenes, and you are not the most important person in the world. You are one mind in a seething sea of minds, all of them clustering numb as jellyfish, in contact but never understanding one another.

Your mom is waiting for an answer, so you tell her your spleen chi is depleted. She's been taking classes in Chinese herbal medicine and seems pleased that you're absorbing her ancient wisdom.

She makes you a grainy tea with plum flower and roasted lotus root, and you drink it to the dregs. It tastes like an extinguished campfire.

*

On Saturday, your grandma takes you to Baskin-Robbins. All her grandchildren get ice cream sundaes when they surpass her in height. You've been looking forward to this rite of passage, thinking you'll finally join your cousins in the ranks of adulthood, but when your grandma explains the situation to the scooper boy, you feel younger than you ever have.

The sundae is good, though. You love the liminal space where hot fudge meets cold vanilla, the chemical pucker of the maraschino cherry, how the things that are worst for you taste the best.

You swirl your green plastic spoon around and consider what to say next. You want to prove that you deserve this sundae, not because you're tall enough, but because you're wise and mature enough.

You settle on: "If you want to dream about something, you just have to think about

it all day.”

Your grandma gives you a funny look. “Or you could just think about it for half an hour before falling asleep.”

You shrug and stare into your yogurt, thinking she knows nothing about obsession.

*

In your best handwriting, on college-ruled notebook paper, you write a letter to the developers at Mom’s Basement Entertainment, imploring them to resurrect Maeve in the game’s sequel.

Two nail-biting weeks later, you get a response—not just an envelope, but a whole box of merch. There’s a Faerie Quest watch, poster, and keychain. The keychain is a tiny stuffed Maeve, her face stitched into a smirk. You clutch it to your chest as you read their typed response.

They thank you for your letter but say there are no plans for a sequel, since Faerie Quest didn’t sell well with boys, who are their primary audience. They do, however, encourage you to purchase Dragon Lords of the Broken Throne, on sale this fall.

*

You think about Maeve all day and dream about her all night. Here, some transference of ownership occurs. Maeve no longer belongs to Mom’s Basement Entertainment, but to you and you alone.

In the dream, you’re alone in Iphigenia’s throne room, facing the throne itself, its cold gold and scrolled arms. You know to poke its inlaid gems in a certain sequence, and a grinding noise behind you signals that the floor has collapsed into a spiraling stairwell. You follow it down into a dark crypt with a ribbed ceiling. Thick mist swirls at the room’s margins, its creepers reaching to bind your ankles.

You know that the mist can’t hurt you, that the goblins and demons it forms are just illusions. You know which path to take to find the marble mausoleum. And you know that her restless spirit demands sacrifice.

You kneel before her burial site, the mist lapping at you like a silent sea. A dagger materializes in your right hand, its hilt molded into butterfly wings. No, faerie wings. Maeve's wings.

You don't hesitate. The cut is deep and clean. For a moment, you think you missed, but then a line of red appears on your wrist, and then the line overflows, splashing the dusty mausoleum steps, and then something intangible shifts in the atmosphere, and your ears fill with the sound of flapping wings—and you wake, knowing what must be done.

*

Sixth grade ends and Ercilia goes to a private middle school for artsy goths. Meanwhile, you enroll in a charter school for kids who “didn't work out” in a traditional system, which your parents thought meant gifted but actually means troubled.

The girls here all hunt for sport. In pre-algebra, they ask if you're bi. You don't know what that means, so you don't respond. The next day, everyone is whispering about you. On the bus, they ask if you're retarded. To preserve your dignity, you ignore them. The next day, more whispers.

Without Ercilia, you're alone on the bus. This used to be your favorite part of the day, when you could watch the desert landscape scroll by and imagine faeries flitting among the sagebrush. But it quickly becomes the thing you dread most. The boys in the back rows have taken an interest in you because you are ugly and smart, two things they fear above all else.

“Let me copy your answers,” one of them says, waving his blank biology worksheet in your face, and when you don't respond, he spits “bitch” under his breath.

*

You fall into a numb khaki world, bored in school, overlooked at home. You collect smooth purple stones, a rabbit skull picked clean of flesh, and—though there are many bacterial reasons why you shouldn't—the freshly dead body of a little brown bat. When your mom sees, she shrieks and marches you to the bathroom sink, pinning your wrists under the stream of scalding water. You trick yourself into embracing the pain, and you are stronger than you thought possible. Later you tell this to Ercilia, and to your surprise she laughs and says that's the stupidest thing

she's ever heard.

She's different now. Puberty has thickened you but sleekened her. Her hair is bleached Iphigenia-blond, an edgy contrast with her dark skin. She's wearing a dog collar and fingerless gloves with lace patterned like spider webs. She strips you of your inner lining and wears it like a cheap costume. What is truth for you is just aesthetic for her.

The rest of your hangout is awkward. She doesn't want to do anything you used to do together—silly photo shoots, filming commercials for random household objects, playing computer games. She doesn't even want a snack, because she's trying to lose six pounds. She picks out a movie, a comedy, but you can't bring yourself to laugh.

You don't call her again, and the one time she calls you, you make your mom say you're not home.

*

The dream again, but this time Maeve's tomb is in your own backyard. Centuries have passed in the faerie realms, and the mausoleum's ruins are buried beneath red dirt and cholla cactus. You pace around the fortress of spikes, but no opening reveals itself. You notice that each pearly spine is red at the root, as if grown from blood.

A strange impulse seizes you, and you wrap your hand around a cactus branch. The pain sparks in the back of your neck, reminding you that your nerve networks branch like the cactus, their spines ending in surprisingly places.

You squeeze, and the sparks settle into a steady burn, then a smoldering ache. Some needles break under pressure; others sink greedily into the meat of your palm.

This is the part where you wake up. But you don't.

Because this isn't a dream.

*

December finds you on a sunken couch, separated by a coffee table from a

therapist. She has cropped silver hair, a necklace made of recycled paper beads, and a voice that is gentle without being condescending. You brace yourself, but in those first 50 minutes, she doesn't ask about your bandaged hand.

It isn't until the second session that she asks why you grabbed the cactus. Fiddling with your stuffed Maeve keychain, you stare at the braided rug. It seems stupid now, like the hot water. Hurting yourself just to prove you're strong enough. Strong enough for what? You have no idea what's coming. The rest of your life sprawls before you like a video game landscape—finite foreground you can only have limited interactions with, haze of background, and nothing in between. It seems both limited and limitless; no matter how it ends, it will end, and there will be no sequel.

It was so much simpler when your save file was only at 12%, before you upgraded Hazel's novice training sword, before Maeve sacrificed herself to save you. You want what you can't have—that feeling of clicking New Game, the stomach-bottoming-out darkness before the first cutscene.

Your silence drags on long enough that the therapist changes direction. "Tell me about your keychain," she says.

You tell her you got it as a consolation prize from a gaming company for boys. It's the right thing to say. The conversation steers towards having a voice in a male-dominated world, and you let the therapist think your problem is sexism, not... whatever it is.

"Do you feel like you have control in your life?" she asks.

This question catches you off guard. You think about the bus that took you and Ercilia to and from school, the same route every day. You think about playing through Faerie Quest twice, the same ending each time.

"I mean, who does?" you say, and she gives you this look, and for a fraction of a second you feel seen, feel known.

*

New Year's Eve. A family friend's house. Posole simmering on the stove, salsa music sizzling in the living room. You wedge yourself into a corner by the snack table, trying to see out the window at the desert but seeing only your haunted

reflection.

The front door swings open, and Ercilia glides in on a draft of cold air. She notices you immediately, so you force your numb lips into a smile.

You don't realize how tall she's gotten until she's standing right next to you. Her black skinny jeans are artfully shredded from thigh to ankle, her burgundy bomber jacket shining like a beetle's carapace. She's literally glowing.

"I haven't seen you in forever!" she squeals, wrapping you in her strong arms. "How are you?"

"Good." The word ghosts out of you.

"Are you still writing?" she asks, and you remember that once upon a time there was a story you wanted to tell, but the feelings never crystallized into words.

"Not really." You dip a pita chip into baba ganoush you don't want, then stare blankly at the gray glop.

"This music sucks," you say, because you feel like you should contribute something to the conversation.

"I got you," she says, pulling an iPod from her pocket. "Wanna sit over here?"

As you follow her to a vacant couch, you remember another New Year's Eve party, three or four years ago, when you and Ercilia swooped through the house pretending to be owls, hooting your hearts out until your mom kicked you outside.

Now, as you sink onto the couch cushion, you're afraid that you'll keep on sinking forever. Ercilia passes you an earbud that doesn't fit properly, so you have to hold it in place. She scrolls through her library by running her thumb in circles around the touch-wheel.

"Here we go," she says. "You'll like this song. It's happy."

Her words are a gut-punch. How could she mistake you for happy? Your thighs are touching, but you've never felt further from her.

Upbeat electro-pop shimmers into your ear canal, and a heavily auto-tuned

woman sings about being a butterfly. You're surprised to realize that you do like this song. You don't return Ercilia's smile, but you don't put down the earbud either. You listen to the music until it ends.

Rita Feinstein is the author of the poetry chapbook *Life on Dodge* (Brain Mill Press, 2018). Her work has appeared in *Grist*, *Willow Springs*, and *Sugar House*, among other publications, and has been nominated for Best of the Net and Best New Poets. She received her MFA from Oregon State University.